

Wilding Out

For the past several years, June, the mother of 16-year-old Liam, has struggled to manage his behavioral problems as they increase in both frequency and intensity with his age. Ranging from recreational abuse of prescription medication to run-ins with the police over thefts and assaults, Liam has become, from June’s perspective, essentially uncontrollable. She has attempted to take a preventative approach to his behavior by, for example, taking his car keys and eliminating his allowance, but Liam continues to subvert her efforts. Soon, Liam is prescribed psychiatric medication to help him deal with his emotional struggles. June has repeatedly sought professional help for him, even going so far as to have him committed to a treatment facility, hoping to get him help for mental illness and drug abuse. A key problem though, June has found, is that Liam sees no real problem with his behavior and is not motivated to change or get better. Feeling that she is out of other options, June is considering sending Liam to a wilderness therapy program.

Wilderness therapy programs are “designed to help troubled teens struggling with addiction, substance abuse, violent behaviors, sexual promiscuity, academic underachievement, and more,” according to a website promoting one such program.¹ These programs will, they claim, allow troubled teens to experience responsibilities and natural consequences by setting up their own camps, hiking several miles every day, and cooking/transporting all of their own food and resources, while also engaging in focused therapy.

Opposing wilderness therapy programs, many former “troubled teens” and their advocates argue that the programs are inhumane, unregulated, and legitimately dangerous to the physical wellbeing of the children they claim to help. For example, a 14-year-old boy died of dehydration when he was placed, unconscious, into his sleeping bag and left there.² Opponents of these programs maintain that teens are asked to hold themselves responsible for past abuses against them and are humiliated constantly in front of their group mates. Teens can only return home when they have been stripped of their self-worth and traumatized into leading predictable, conforming lives.

However, some feel that these programs do work. Graduates leave valuing their freedom, and with a new awareness that they should behave appropriately to continue to enjoy it. After spending several months at rock-bottom, covered in dirt and bug bites, and experiencing physical exertion, self-destructive behavior such as drug abuse or crime loses much of its allure. Learning to appreciate nature, self-sufficiency, and collaboration with others are values that people often celebrate. Because these programs are construed as rehabilitative rather than punitive, many see them as more productive and humane in desperate cases than, for example, incarceration or military school.

For her part, June struggles with the allure of a wilderness therapy program; if it would provide a long-term solution to Liam’s problems, keeping him away from drugs and out of prison into adulthood, might it be worth the risks to his physical and emotional wellbeing?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what extent is it permissible for rehabilitative therapies to cause physical or emotional distress as part of the process?
2. How responsible are parents for the behavior of their children?
3. To what extent is it permissible for parents to act counter to what their teenage children want?

¹ <https://www.wingatewildernesstherapy.com/g/wilderness-therapy-programs-for-troubled-teens>

² <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/7/12081150/wilderness-therapy>

